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Fredericks, Bronwyn L. ***I don't want the vacancy... Aboriginal women, the women's movement and the women's health centre.*** The Rockhampton Women's Health Centre 10th birthday celebration dinner, The Pavilion, Rockhampton, Queensland, 31st May 2001.

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I don't want the vacancy... Aboriginal Women, the Women's Movement and the Women's Health Centre

Bronwyn Lea Fredericks

The Rockhampton Women's Health Centre 10th Birthday Celebrations

The Pavilion, Rockhampton, Queensland

31st May 2001

I begin by acknowledging the Darumbal peoples the Traditional Owners of the land now called Rockhampton in these post-invasion times. I acknowledge sincerely the Darumbal women and the other Aboriginal women who now live in Darumbal land, those that are here this evening. I acknowledge the non-Indigenous women that are here this evening. I acknowledge the Aboriginal women from throughout the region who have died as a result of colonial violence, dispossession, imperialism, war, abuse, illness, racism, murder, broken hearts, broken spirits, and as a result of becoming old. It is important to note that not many of us become what is considered old. It is known that using western indicators, that we do not collectively live as long as non-Indigenous women. We are collectively poorer, sicker, not as highly educated, face greater numbers of our family members in jail, attend a greater number of funerals in any one year, are subject to higher levels of violence, racism, sexism, and more aspects when compared to non-Indigenous women. Many of you know the statistics and how we are 'measured up' against the statistics of non-Indigenous women, 'white women' as I have just done. I am concerned with the 'measuring up' of us as Aboriginal women as I am with the 'measuring up' that is done with women of non-English speaking backgrounds, women with a disability and other groups of women. Some of you here know from a distance the lives we live and the issues we face. Some of you here know from standing by our sides the lives we live and the issues we face. That is, the struggles of being an Aboriginal woman in this world that is now sometimes called contemporary.

Some of you from a distance know something of me, something of other individual Aboriginal women and something of Aboriginal women as a collective group. I ask do you know me simply as 'Other' or do you know me, the essence of who I am as an Aboriginal woman named Bronwyn Lea Fredericks?

I have used my full name this evening. I normally use Bronwyn Fredericks. I have used my second name, which is derived from my mother's name, Leah. My sisters and I all carry my mother's name of Leah within our names. Being an evening of women, I felt that I would give honour to the woman who birthed me, borne me, as a girl, and as a woman in this life, in order that I may be here with you this evening. Understand that I give respect to women as the doorways, from which all human life passes and in this we are precious. I am precious as you are precious.

I see feminism, the Women's Movement and the Women's Health Movement state that it is for all women, that it is based on gender oppression, the fight against patriarchy, that it is about women in control for women, by women. In essence feminism and these movements make it known that they regard all women as precious. I do not however, see the broader acceptance or regard for one another as precious. I do not generally see women looking at each other's situations and working on issues associated with disadvantage and disadvantage experienced by women. I have seen in some of the work I do some women wanting their preciousness only Regarded by men within their same race – that is white women are generally fighting for equality with white men. I also see women fighting for equality within their class and within their same economic and political vantage points.

I wish to speak further to this in regards to feminism and the women's movement. I have often been asked to speak at women's gatherings, to give input on what might something 'culturally appropriate', how can something be made 'more inclusive', what might 'encourage Aboriginal women to participate' and other such questions and requests. I know that at times Aboriginal women have drifted into the feminist movement for a range of reasons. Feminism at times has been a source of analysis that Aboriginal women may borrow from in search of answers for Aboriginal women. There are times when it has been a comfort for me, as I know it has been a comfort to others. However, know that in the end the answers for Aboriginal women must come from Aboriginal women and being engaged within the feminist movement does not mean that Aboriginal women have embraced feminism. There are numerous Aboriginal women that have written on the subject of feminism in Australia, none supporting feminism out rightly.¹

When I am asked such questions and requests, at times it comes across as if the women's movement has been trying to accommodate us as Aboriginal women. That the women's movement has at times worked from the positioning of attempting to accommodate us and

make some cosmetic, surface changes within that accommodation. It is like for example, a large hotel that undertakes a renovation but undertakes merely a re-pain job, and adds new furniture and new paintings on the walls. It does not include a renovating by changing the structure, shifting walls, removing barriers and creating new spaces, and making some changes to the way staff work within the hotel. I say very clearly that I don't want to be accommodated within this type of renovation that will be undertaken by the women's movement. For the women's movement to want to accommodate me, within a structure that is essentially about mainstream women's business and white feminismⁱⁱ is quite offensive. If it is only about the accommodation, tizzing up the accommodation, and making us feel included in a sense but not part of the structure, without touching the structure or the philosophy of why you exist, then I believe Aboriginal women will never truly be incorporated within the women's movement. The daughters, grand-daughters and great great-grand-daughters of communities of women will continue to face a false sense of feminism and fortified white feminism not clearly within this region and elsewhere.

I don't want to spend time engaging the women's movement trying to figure out who made the decision and who had the conversation that we should be accommodated. I think this is bound up in many historical, colonial and political practices. I do want to see women who jumped into the conversation mid-stream stop the conversation and back up. For some of us here, we are in this position. I want us to look at where is the women's movement at? What do we mean when you or I, we, talk about feminism now in 2001? What is the women's health centre in Rockhampton really about now? Where do we want it to go? What will the next ten years look like? What involvement will you, I, we have within that next ten years? Note the word we....this implies you and I, and us.

From my perspective, I want non-Indigenous women to begin to know who we are as Aboriginal women. First and foremost, I want you to know who you are. It is only through coming to an understanding of the untalked about, the invisible privileges that non-Indigenous Anglo-Australian (White) women haveⁱⁱⁱ, that you will understand us even a little more. I want non-Indigenous women to understand that they are not faceless when they name us as Aboriginal women. In you naming us as Aboriginal women, there is the creation of 'Other', the creation of Self. In the naming of myself as an Aboriginal woman, I also name non-Indigenous women. We do have some similar issues to deal with, however, the way in which those issues manifest can be oppressingly different.

I put it out there, that there is the capacity while fighting for the equity of 'women' to continue the marginalising of Aboriginal women. There is the capacity of some women to rise above their present positioning leaving Aboriginal women in the dust where their feet once stood in the name of feminism. There is the capacity to continue to perpetuate many of the comparison aspects like the example I first spoke of. There is capacity to create further disparities between Aboriginal women and non-Indigenous women that can be measured up as and by western indicators. With the rising of some groups of women and the continued marginality of Aboriginal women, we Aboriginal women can continue to face the prospect of being 'compared with' and 'measured up against'. In not wanting to look at this, in not wanting to listen to this, you, I, we can be part of the blindness of further pain that can be inflicted on others.

I say to you that we are the First women; the Indigenous women; the Aboriginal women. We didn't go away and we are not going away. We have survived and we continue to survive in the future. We have every right as Aboriginal women, every ethical, moral and legal right to assert and be who we are as Aboriginal women. In this, I do not want to be accommodated. I am no longer going to participate in conversations where the dialogue runs one way, like the Fitzroy River as it heads out to the coast after heavy rain. I am no longer going to have conversations when I know the conversation is going to head to the end with how best I can be accommodated.

If the mainstream women's movement wishes to change the structures that would see all women come to a position where there is open negotiation based on what we all want as women and from positions of advantage and disadvantage then there must be some changes. This evening there is involvement from Aboriginal women in the 10th Anniversary Dinner Celebrations. Aboriginal women have joined with other women in the Celebrations. We as individuals have made a decision to be here as we make the decisions to be at other gatherings, to participate in other events such as Domestic Violence Week, Reclaim the Night, and other such events. We can only do this when the capacity to make the decisions about our involvement is presented. When we can negotiate how our involvement will happen, how we will be involved, and provide input into the events in a way that leads to our participation. If we are not included in decision-making, not included in planning and not included in organising then we are being accommodated and not active woman participants as the women's movement proclaims it fosters within itself.

I recognise that we need discussions to happen at the community level and at government and political levels. I recognise that for us here in Rockhampton and Central Queensland we need to be creating spaces that enable us to have the conversations, dialogue, discourse, tears, laughter and cups of tea if that's what it takes, if that's what helps some stay put for a while, to bring the talk down to our daily experiences and lives as women in this community and in the surrounding communities. We need to talk more than just accommodation. We need to talk more than slight adjustments. We need to talk about give and take, exchange of some power and we need to talk about inclusion, incorporation and partnerships. This is monumental task for all of us. We need to turn things around for us if we are going to talk of us, us women of the region.

In concluding I dedicate this paper to Joan Marion Brady who was a founding member of the Rockhampton Women's Health Centre and a driver for numerous support services for non-Indigenous and Indigenous women within Rockhampton and the Central Queensland Region. Joan passed away in June 2000. She said once when we were discussing change in another arena. I'm up to it, are you? I say the same thing here to you tonight, the women of Rockhampton who can have a direct involvement and can have an impact on what happens for non-Indigenous women and Aboriginal women in Rockhampton. I'm up to it, are you?

ⁱ See Huggins, Jackie 1994. A contemporary view of Aboriginal women's relationship to the White women's movement, in N Grieve & A Burns (eds), *Australian women and contemporary feminist thought*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, pp.70-79; and Moreton-Robinson, Aileen 2000. *Talkin' up to the White women: Indigenous women and feminism*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia.

ii. Moreton-Robinson, 2000.

iii. Moreton-Robinson, 2000.